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Food poverty contributors: individual, structural or political? Examining stakeholder perspectives using interviews and nominal group technique

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Abstract

Purpose: Food poverty has been identified as a significant societal and public health problem in the UK, evidenced in part by published statistics on the prevalence of food poverty, and the well-documented increase in the uptake of food bank provision. This paper presents various theoretical perspectives regarding the aetiology of (food) poverty, followed by stakeholders' opinions on the contributors to food poverty and consideration of how these align with various theoretical perspectives.

Methodology: Data were collected from a range of stakeholders in Northern Ireland including consumer representatives, policy makers, and public health representatives. Data collection occurred in two phases: firstly via in-depth interviews (n=19), and secondly via roundtables (n=4) with stakeholders (n=36) using Nominal Group Technique.

Findings: Various individual, structural and political factors were identified by stakeholders as contributors to food poverty, with income largely agreed to be the most significant contributor. Two themes of contributors were identified during analysis: micro level and individual level contributors, and macro level economic level contributors. Structural factors were most commonly cited as contributors to food poverty during both stakeholder interviews and stakeholder roundtables, followed by individual factors, and political factors.

Originality: There is a lack of theoretical and conceptual literature regarding the causes of food poverty, and there has to date been limited research on the contributors to food poverty in Northern Ireland/the United Kingdom.

Practical Implications: Understanding the contributors to food poverty can inform targeted policy action.

Introduction

Food poverty, defined as “*the insufficient economic access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory and socially acceptable diet*” (O’Connor *et al.*, 2016, p. 429), has emerged as a social policy and public health concern throughout the last decade (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Furey, 2019). In the United Kingdom (UK), it is estimated that 8.4 million people are living in food poverty (Sustain, 2020), and in the year 2019-20 approximately 1.9 million people in the UK accessed a food bank, an increase of almost 300,000 from the previous year (Clark, 2020). Certain groups have been found to be more likely to experience food poverty, such as those on low wages or insecure work contracts, those in receipt of welfare payments, families with children, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups living in the UK (Garratt, 2017; McBride *et al.*, 2018; Loopstra *et al.*, 2019; Sustain, 2020). Food poverty can be experienced in the shorter-term triggered by a change in circumstances or crisis, or it can be a longer-term experience of inadequate access to sufficient food or inability to afford a nutritionally satisfactory diet (Pitt and Shaw, 2020). ‘Food poverty’ can be considered synonymous with ‘poverty’ (King *et al.*, 2015), and various theoretical perspectives as to why (food) poverty occurs exist. These can largely be compiled into three main themes: (i) behavioural / individual, (ii) structural, and (iii) political (Brady, 2018; Sameti *et al.*, 2012; Bradshaw, 2006).

Individual or behavioural theories are rooted in the belief that the free market system provides opportunity for all and that individuals are therefore responsible for working hard in order to provide for themselves (Sameti *et al.*, 2012). Classical economic theory and its subset theories (behavioural / decision based theory and the ‘subculture of poverty’ theory) are used to explain why food poverty occurs from an individualistic perspective. Classical theory centres on the

efficiency of exchange in the marketplace, with the belief that productivity is correlated to reward (wages), thereby viewing poverty as a consequence of inefficient or poor choices (Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015). Within classical theory various approaches exist: for example, *behavioural or decision based theory* refers to the idea of those in deprivation making choices to effectively ‘self-select’ into this condition (e.g. participating in behaviours which can increase susceptibility to poverty, such as choosing not to work or not to pursue education) (Blank, 2003; Bertrand *et al.*, 2004), while the ‘*subculture*’ of *poverty theory* refers to the idea that living in a deprived state is intergenerational, influenced by genetics or upbringing / environment (Bradshaw, 2006; Ananat, 2011; Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015).

Structural theories relating to poverty focus on how macro and meso demographic and economic factors can influence poverty status (Brady, 2018). Demographic contextual factors include factors such as neighbourhood disadvantage, age / gender composition and urbanization, while economic contextual factors include economic growth and development, changes in markets, industrialisation, and demand for skills (Townsend, 1979; Bradshaw, 2006; Brady, 2018). From an economic theoretical perspective, the neo-classical theory is one of the main labour-market theories which can be used when considering structural causes of food poverty (Sameti *et al.*, 2012). Conversely to classical theory, which emphasises the role of the individual, neoclassical theory instead considers the role of the competitive marketplace and failures in the market or economy which are beyond individuals’ control as an aggravator of poverty (Blank, 2003; Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015). Factors which could be considered as beyond individuals’ control are, for example, barriers to education, reduced opportunities for marginalised groups (e.g. those of immigrant status) or single parent families, poor health, and advanced age (Barr, 2012; Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015). These factors

are likely to reduce ability to find work, or to join the workforce, and therefore can increase the likelihood of (food) poverty (Reinstadler and Ray, 2010).

Political factors are theorised to contribute to or influence poverty on the basis that political regulations and laws determine how economic resources are distributed, and governmental departments implement policies which can be viewed to contribute to poverty (Brady, 2018). Some therefore view economic and political discrimination as a contributor to poverty (Bradshaw, 2006). Two main economic theories which relate to the political factors' opinion are Keynesian / neo-liberal and Marxian / radical theory. Contrasting the classical theory approach focus on the individual, and the neo-classical theory focus on uncontrollable markets, Keynesian / neo-liberal theory recognises the importance of government for a stable economy and provision of public goods. This school of thought further considers poverty to be an involuntary state (contrasting the classical opinion that it is as a result of poor individual choices) that is primarily caused by unemployment (Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015). Marxian / radical theory differs from Keynesian / neo-liberal theory in that it does not view economic growth as sufficient to improve poverty, as it adopts the view that capitalism and other social and political factors, such as class division, have the greatest bearing on poverty, and that economic growth may therefore not benefit the poorest (Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015).

Earlier studies have identified a range of contributors to food poverty such as income, health problems, unemployment, low educational attainment, and various demographic factors such as age, number in the household, and minority group status (Furey *et al.*, 2019; Loopstra *et al.*, 2019; Tarasuk *et al.*, 2019). However, there are currently gaps in the literature relating to the

theoretical underpinnings of contributors, and regarding food poverty contributors in Northern Ireland (NI)/the UK. This study therefore aims to address these gaps by qualitatively examining the contributors of food poverty in NI according to stakeholders, and considering which of the prior discussed theoretical perspectives (individual, structural, political) most align with identified contributors.

Methods

Stakeholders' opinions regarding contributors to food poverty were investigated using a two-stage approach. Study 1 involved in-depth interviews with stakeholders (n=19) and Study 2 involved roundtables (n=4) with stakeholders (n=36) and used Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to achieve consensus. Both stakeholder samples included consumer representatives, public health practitioners, policy makers, community workers, academics, and political representatives. Stakeholders were selected due to the relevance of food poverty to their work remit. Some participants were previously known to the research team, and others were identified as appropriate through recommendations from others, and internet searches.

Study 1

Participant recruitment

Participants were invited via an email which explained the purpose of the research and what their participation would involve. Thirty prospective participants were contacted, and of these nineteen progressed to interview. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the interviews and for anonymised quotes to be used in subsequent publications.

Data collection

This research was part of a larger study which examined stakeholders' views on a range of topics related to food poverty. Therefore, an interview topic guide was created and used, consisting of questions arranged in six themes related to food poverty, of which one related to the causes of food poverty. Interviews lasting 30-60 minutes were carried out over a period of six months, and were audio-recorded to facilitate transcription.

Data analysis

Data were inductively thematically analysed. Firstly, interview transcriptions were read to achieve data immersion, then coded according to emerging codes using NVivo12. Codes were then examined to find common themes, and corresponding subthemes. A sample (n=3) of transcripts were coded by a second researcher to confirm inter-coder agreement, and all codes and themes were discussed and agreed upon by all researchers in the team to further increase reliability.

Study 2

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited from a group of attendees at a Food Poverty Stakeholder Forum, hosted by the research team. The purpose of the Forum was to communicate existing research findings on the topic to relevant persons, and to encourage discussion to inform future research and practical actions. Appropriate stakeholders were identified and invited via email to attend the Forum. All attendees (n=36) agreed to participate in the roundtable discussion and data collection. Eight of the Study 2 participants had previously participated in Study 1 interviews.

Data collection

NGT, a structured process which enables rapid collection of both qualitative and quantitative data from a group of individuals who have insight or expertise into a particular area or topic (Gallagher *et al.*, 1993; McMillan *et al.*, 2016) was decided to be the most appropriate method. This method was chosen as it provides participants with the opportunity to meet in person and generate ideas together to reach consensus (Foth *et al.*, 2017), and unlike focus groups, the NGT allows participants the opportunity to discuss ideas independent of a researcher, therefore potentially reducing bias. Stakeholder attendees were split into four groups related to their job role, as it was assumed those working in similar areas were more likely to have similar views. This allowed for analysis of difference of opinion among different stakeholder groups (Hoekstra, 2017). Stakeholder groups were as follows: (i) public health representatives / policy makers (n=10), (ii) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) / community workers (n=10), (iii) local government representatives / consumer organisations (n=9), and (v) academics from food policy, business, and nutrition perspectives (n=7). A six-stage NGT process was followed (table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Stakeholders were asked to silently and individually list and rank contributors to food poverty in NI. These were then discussed within the group in order to compile a group list, ranking the ‘top five’ most prominent contributors in their opinion, with the highest score (5) given to the most prominent contributor.

Data analysis

The within-group consensually agreed lists of contributors and scores were compiled in order to produce an overall workshop list of scored contributors. The contributors with the highest scores were regarded as the most prevalent contributors to food poverty according to stakeholders.

Results

Study 1 – Stakeholder interviews

Inductive analysis of Study 1 data identified a theme which centred principally on how external and individual factors influence the prevalence of food poverty. This theme was termed ‘contributors to food poverty’, and two subthemes identified relating to micro-level and macro-level individual and economic level contributors.

Micro-Level Economic and Individual Level Contributors

Although low income was widely agreed as the most prominent contributor to food poverty, it was acknowledged that there are certain individual or household level factors that exist which can increase susceptibility.

Household size / the number of children in a household was considered to potentially increase vulnerability to food poverty due to increased pressures on the household budget. The majority of stakeholders (n=16) mentioned children and discussed the added financial strain they can bring to households. As well as increased demand on essential living costs such as food and

clothes, those with children are often required, or feel obliged, to pay certain expenses, for example school uniform / equipment costs, or costs related to social outings:

“People don’t want their child to be the one different.” (Food bank)

Particular life stages were cited as potentially making people more susceptible to food poverty; for example, some discussed how the elderly may struggle living solely on a pension income. Single parents, particularly women, was a further group considered as possibly more likely to become food insecure:

“I think gender and age could [be] potential predictors.” (Social Policy)

Two interviewees discussed pensions as insufficient. One consumer representative speaking on the behalf of older people discussed how income was a significant problem for older people and that pensioner poverty affects almost one-fifth of older people:

“...Income is a big issue for older people, and pensioner poverty in NI is around 20%...You have over 300,000 pensioners, so you’re talking maybe 60,000 people who are living in poverty.” (Consumer representative)

Conversely, an interviewee working in a community advice role commented that in comparison to other groups who receive money from the government, the elderly are the best off, having the least shortfall between the amount of benefit (or pension) received and the income required to meet the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) (see Russell and McKay, 2018).

Food poverty occurring among the elderly was discussed by some stakeholders as a problem which may not result solely from inadequate financial access to food, but rather that physical access problems, lack of skills, or mental health problems could hinder the elderly from acquiring adequate food, despite perhaps having the financial means to do so.

Poor physical and mental health was associated with food poverty by the majority of stakeholders (n=15) and it was viewed as both a potential contributor to, and consequence of, food poverty, however it was not seen as a prominent cause of food poverty:

“There’s no doubt sickness and people being off sick have an impact on food poverty [but], it wouldn’t be as high as some of the others to be honest.” (Food bank)

Stakeholders (n=5) discussed various reasons how poor health could contribute to food poverty. They considered that those with a physical health problem or disability may find it more difficult to physically access food, or that those with mental health problems may lack the motivation to acquire food. Alternatively, if someone is unable to work due to a physical or mental health condition, they may have constrained financial access to food if they are reliant on benefits, have problems claiming benefits, or if welfare reforms reduce the amount of money to which they are entitled.

It was also discussed by one stakeholder how caring responsibilities in a non-professional capacity (i.e. caring for a friend or family member with poor health or a disability) can leave

the carer vulnerable to food poverty if they have to give up their employment or reduce their hours in employment.

Approximately one-third of stakeholders (n=6) cited addiction as a potential contributor to food poverty. Those with addictions can struggle for reasons of prioritising money for their addiction (e.g. drugs, gambling, tobacco or alcohol), and considering financing it as being as important as other priority living costs such as paying rent:

“The person might smoke 40 cigarettes a day and that’s £20 a day, that’s £140 a week, but because they’re addicted to that they see that much more as a priority than food.” (Local Council)

The majority of stakeholders (n=5) who discussed addiction were those whose remit involved working in the community with those experiencing food poverty, for example in an advice agency role. Therefore, they spoke from the perspective of having worked with those with addictions who view this expense as an essential household budget item.

Aside from food affordability issues there are various other reasons which may inhibit access to acquiring sufficient food. Four diverse stakeholders from academic, political, policy and consumer organisations discussed lack of access to a car as potentially making it more difficult for people to access food:

“...because stores are more likely edge of town in Northern Ireland”.
(Academic)

and how this lack of access could mean people may have to rely on convenience stores where prices were likely to be higher and availability of foods to be reduced.

Lacking ability or knowledge to buy and prepare meals can also make someone more vulnerable to food poverty:

“It’s the ability to take it [food] back to your house and cook it; a lot of skills have been lost, maybe haven’t been handed down from one generation to the next. They maybe don’t have the cooking facilities, it’s maybe their education, [knowing] what are healthy foods.” (Health Policy)

Nine stakeholders discussed how budgeting issues and lack of knowledge and skills can cause some to turn to meal solutions perceived to be more convenient such as takeaways or ready meals rather than buying raw ingredients, cooking from scratch and potentially saving money:

“I think there is a misconception that healthy food is expensive. There’s a lot of research saying it’s not.” (Health Policy)

Further, people may not have sufficient financial planning or budgeting skills to maximise the income that they do have:

“A lot of people are very bad at financial budgeting and planning, [and that] of course, is a part of the issue.” (Academic / Political Councillor)

Therefore, as food is often seen as a flexible item in the household budget (Caraher and Furey, 2018), those who have budgeting issues may struggle to plan their financial resources so that they have adequate money left over for food when they pay other essential expenses.

Lack of social support can also make people more vulnerable if they have issues accessing or preparing food independently:

“...social support is a factor if you’re not physically mobile. So, if you don’t have family nearby and you’re not physically able then you are restricted”. (Consumer representative)

Change in circumstances was cited as increasing susceptibility to food poverty. Examples were provided from a food bank representative of people they had come into contact with whom were once secure financially but had found themselves reliant on emergency food provision because of sudden caring responsibilities for an ill relative, certain legal payments, or delay in wages being paid at the end of the month:

“We had a young fella [who committed an offence]. He goes to court, fined nearly £700. Mum and Dad have to pick up the tab. They can’t really afford it. They pay the fine, leaves the family with no money. So, you can see how random things can happen; it’s not always what you would expect.” (Food bank)

Other vulnerable groups or circumstances mentioned included those in debt and those who lack savings as consequent constraints on income make it more difficult to cope with unexpected situations:

“No one saves. People are literally living month to month...it could be your washing machine breaking down, that could send you into the absolute depths.”

(Political Councillor)

Further, a change in circumstances or sudden need to pay an unexpected bill can dramatically increase a person's or household's vulnerability, and may result in them turning to un reputable sources to borrow money, thereby potentially exacerbating their money problems:

“...Your bank won't give [money], credit union won't give [money] and you've exhausted all avenues. Where are you going to go? Loan sharks? They deliberately target people.” (Political Councillor)

Macro-Level Economic Contributors

In addition to the various individual and household level factors which can increase vulnerability to food poverty, there were several macro-economic contributors discussed by stakeholders such as the changing nature of work, increased cost of living, and various systematic and government-related issues.

Insufficient income was largely agreed to be the main contributor to a person becoming food insecure, with 14 stakeholders referring to income as a contributor:

“Income has to be one of the big things, if not the biggest.” (Consumer organisation)

The majority of respondents (n=14) referred to the ‘working poor’, a state when those who are employed on either a full time, part time or casual basis are still struggling with inadequate income to cover their living costs:

“...in the past when you talked about poverty it was about people on benefits; now more than half of children in poverty are living in families where someone is in work.” (Consumer representative)

Evidencing this, a food bank practitioner commented that it is not uncommon for their clients to be in employment:

“We would say that most people we deal with are actually low paid as opposed to on benefits.” (Food bank)

When discussing the phenomenon of the working poor, two stakeholders from local government and political perspectives considered how certain people may rationalise that they are better off depending on benefits than working as their income from employment is lower than, or only marginally more than, they would receive from benefits, and therefore being employed does not necessarily protect them from vulnerability to food poverty.

Many participants discussed the cost of living as a major contributing factor to food poverty.

“I think it’s the cost of living has gone up and it’s not reflected in people’s wages.” (Food redistribution organisation)

The nature of food being a ‘flexible budget item’ was cited as problematic as people consequently prioritise essential, non-negotiable bills such as mortgage / rent, utilities, childcare, and then use whatever is left over for food, which is often inadequate:

“There’s only certain things that people can cut back on and one of them is food.” (Consumer representative)

The price of childcare was discussed as a living expense which could be particularly burdensome for families, but for some it was felt an unavoidable cost to allow mothers to return to work so that they could continue to progress in employment once their child(ren) begin school. The price of childcare was cited as *“the equivalent of another rent”* [Consumer representative] and some discussed how the price of childcare may prohibit parents from participating in the workforce:

“Childcare costs actually render it irrational to go to work for a lot of males and females.” (Political representative – MLA)

Further to this, findings from a recent (2018) report were discussed which found that some parents in employment were skipping meals in order to pay for childcare:

“Who would have thought that? You would never assume that a parent who’s paying childcare because they’re in work is actually depriving themselves of food in order to have the ability to pay bills.” (Political representative – MLA)

A stakeholder suggested that childcare should be a public service similar to free schooling:

“Schooling is a public service. Why is early years not a public service?”

(Consumer representative)

Housing costs and the uncertainty surrounding security of tenure can affect a household’s vulnerability to food poverty. A political representative commented that in their experience working in the community:

“[Poverty] manifests itself in a number of ways but, for us, the biggest way is in housing.” (Political representative – MLA)

A consumer representative further commented on how lack of secure tenure can contribute to household’s vulnerability to [food] poverty:

“Housing is eating up a huge amount of people’s income...and then being precarious, being thrown out, not having security of tenure.” (Consumer representative)

Over one-fifth of stakeholders expressed concerns about Brexit with regards to food costs and the potential negative impact this could have on households’ vulnerability to food poverty or severity of food poverty.

“...and Brexit is probably going to have a massive impact on [food prices] as well, initially anyway.” (Local council)

Although there was a general consensus (n=13) that it was primarily lack of income/money which makes people vulnerable to food poverty, it was also acknowledged that there are deep-rooted issues that need resolved. Although the importance of a basic income which covers outgoings was discussed, the point was also made that the issue is more complex and is rooted in systemic issues:

“This isn’t an easy fix in my opinion. It’s not just a matter of supplying a bit more money to people so they can buy food; that’s not going to fix the problem. It’s a systemic thing.” (Public Health)

Approximately one-third of those interviewed (n=7) spoke negatively about current government activity with regards to food poverty, for example that they are not interested in the problem, or that there is a need to ‘embarrass’ them into action:

“There’s a lot of hard evidence goes into the government and they do not listen.” (Community Advice)

These views were shared by a diverse range of stakeholders, including those working in politics, those working for consumer organisations, and those working in the community. Some blamed government policies for increasing vulnerability to food poverty:

“I am absolutely convinced that the root causes of [food poverty] are changes in the economic and welfare system as a result of austerity.” (Academic / Political Councillor)

The majority of those interviewed (n=17) regarded benefits as insufficient. Some interviewees, particularly those working within the community, discussed how problems with the benefits system, such as payments being stopped or delayed for various reasons, can leave people more vulnerable to food poverty as they are left without their primary source of income:

“We had a person who came to us last year and he hadn’t eaten in three days because his benefit had been stopped and he was on no income for three weeks.”

(Consumer representative)

Certain interviewees spoke about how although certain measures, such as pension credit to top up pensions, are available to help people, the procedure required to access these benefits (e.g. online applications) can be too difficult for some to navigate, or they are unaware of what they are entitled to, so they go without.

Several stakeholders (n=6) discussed current and impending changes related to Welfare Reform such as the introduction of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments as problematic. Some stakeholders working in the community cited first-hand observation of the negative impacts of welfare reform:

“...A couple of years ago when I first came on council I gave out two vouchers within the first six months, and as a councillor I’ve now given out six this month, and this constituency office has given out four this month...So I’m correlating that with the welfare changes that are being brought in in this area.” (Political Councillor)

However, it was generally discussed that the full ramifications of welfare reform have not yet been realised as it has not yet been wholly implemented in NI; however there were clear concerns of potential problems it will cause for vulnerable households:

“Research has shown although [welfare reform] hasn’t really hit home here 100%, people waiting for their benefits that can impact their diet and they would be even more likely to need emergency food provision [in that waiting period].”

(Food redistribution organisation)

Compounding concerns regarding welfare reform, the UK’s impending exit from the European Union was considered to add further uncertainty to the economic environment:

“I think more research has to be done [on] the [implications] of changes in benefit reform and how Brexit will affect food poverty and the food industry system, food prices...There’s a lot of uncertainty now.” (Food redistribution organisation)

Conversely to the majority opinion which viewed welfare reform negatively, one interviewee viewed welfare reform as being potentially useful to improve people’s financial situation:

“I think welfare reform probably in general will make it so that people who are working will be financially better off.” (Local Council)

Some stakeholders (n=4) spoke about societal inequality as a contributor to food poverty:

“My own view, and I think the academic research bears it out, that the more unequal a society gets - that causes poverty.” (Academic / Political Councillor)

Certain stakeholders discussed differences in equality within the same town or area:

“Yeah sure they have inequalities between this part of the [named] road and the upper [named] road. In this area, about 70% of kids are getting free school meals whereas up in [named area] its 4%.” (Community Advice)

Two interviewees discussed how changing society in terms of the social breakdown of families and dispersion of the family unit is a factor which could contribute to people being vulnerable, and why they are now relying on sources such as food banks rather than family and friends to help in time of need:

“... Years ago, even if you couldn't afford food, you had the support around you. So you might have been going over to your parents or you might have been going to your friends for Sunday dinner...But because people are so socially isolated now, if you are in that problem it is very difficult to get out of it yourself. You are relying on outside agencies.” (Local government)

Corresponding with this, a food bank practitioner discussed how clients in vulnerable situations in the past would have had to rely on friends or family to help them out, but now that food banks are more widespread, they may come to rely on them instead:

“Now what would those people have done in the past? They would probably have went to neighbours, friends, family and got help; but because we're here

and they're more aware of us, they knew they could come to us for help.” (Food bank)

Study 2 – Stakeholder roundtables

Top five contributors as ranked by each of the four groups are presented in table 2. Each contributor was scored with the ‘top’ contributor being given a score of five. Stakeholders across all groups were in agreement that low disposable income was the greatest contributor to food poverty.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Scores for each contributor as ranked by each group were then added to produce an overall Forum ‘top five’ contributors (table 3). Income was considered to be the most significant contributor with the highest ranked score, having been agreed by each group as the most prominent contributor. Contributors further to income were relatively similar in relation to their total score, indicating that aside from income there is a lack of strong consensus as to the most significant contributors to food poverty. The contributors ‘physical / mental health problems / disability’, ‘welfare’, and ‘access’ were identified as three separate categories of contributors by stakeholders, however they each received the same overall total score, therefore are presented equally ranked in the table.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Discussion

Stakeholders discussed various contributors which can make households more vulnerable to food poverty. The literature discusses how the combining of vulnerabilities can particularly increase the likeliness of food poverty (Hamelin *et al.*, 2010; Thompson *et al.*, 2018), as vulnerable households will be less resilient against shocks (Pieters *et al.*, 2013). Structural factors were most commonly discussed/cited as contributors to food poverty in both Study 1 and Study 2, followed by individual factors, and political factors. Although approximately one-third of stakeholders in Study 1 expressed a negative sentiment towards the government's response to food poverty, and a number also cited welfare issues linked to government as a contributing factor, political factors were on the whole less frequently discussed in comparison to structural and individual factors. Likewise in Study 2, political factors were least commonly cited as key contributors to food poverty, with just one group (NGOs / community workers) citing 'welfare' as a key contributor. It is not evident however whether welfare in this instance was cited as a contributor from the political theoretical perspective of government insufficiency, or the individualistic/behavioural theoretical perspective of individual shortcoming.

Income was largely agreed to be the main contributor to food poverty, a finding consistent with similar study findings regarding households' and stakeholders' viewpoints on the food security experience (Hamelin *et al.*, 2010; Butcher *et al.*, 2019). This supposition has been further confirmed quantitatively in the literature in a range of locations and contexts (e.g. Leroux *et al.*, 2018; Loopstra *et al.*, 2019). Theoretically considering income as a contributor to food poverty

is complex, as income can be viewed as an individualistic issue related to lack of motivation to pursue education or employment but can also be attributed to structural and political barriers and resultant reduced opportunity and resources.

It is generally assumed, and has been proven in the literature, that those who are unemployed will have a lower income than those who are employed, and are therefore more susceptible to food poverty (Royston, 2017; Loopstra *et al.*, 2019). However, although unemployment was discussed among stakeholders as problematic for household food security outcomes, several stakeholders identified an additional group (the ‘working poor’) i.e. those who are in employment but are low paid, or who have irregular work hours, as being particularly vulnerable. The phenomenon of the working poor has also been discussed in the literature (Coleman-Jensen, 2011; McBride *et al.*, 2018), and in the media (Butler, 2019; Rovnick, 2019). The concept of the ‘working poor’ disputes the previously discussed individualistic classical theory that if people are willing to work hard, they will be rewarded with adequate wages. Rather, it is aligned with structural or political theoretical perspectives which premise that failure in the markets, or lack of social mobility and opportunity, or insufficient policies governing wages and work contracts contribute to poverty. Changes in the labour market, globalisation, and the consequences to the labour market of subsequent industrial revolutions were discussed by stakeholders as impacting upon the demand for labour; impactors which are also discussed in the literature (Barr, 2012; Sissons *et al.*, 2018).

Contributors to food poverty identified by stakeholders were consistent with those identified in the literature, such as benefit sanctions (Adler, 2016) and benefit changes and delays (Garratt, 2017). A food bank practitioner interviewed stated that in their experience the

majority of those visiting the food bank were low-paid as opposed to being on benefits, and that another significant group of clients was those who had problems with income due to benefit changes and delays. Garratt (2017) carried out a study on food bank recipients and found that the greatest proportion of those visiting food banks were doing so because of benefit changes and delays, followed by those on low income. Therefore, perhaps a greater focus should be asserted on the management of benefit processes to reduce the vulnerability of those on benefits, and to reduce waiting times that people are left without money.

Several stakeholders discussed the association of poor health, both physical and mental, with food poverty, and discussion of health centred particularly on mental health. Similarly, poor health has largely been linked with food poverty in the literature (Siefert *et al.*, 2004; Furey *et al.*, 2019). Physical or mental health problems can increase vulnerability to food poverty as they can limit employment options or ability to work (Lent *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, it is important that policies are in place to adequately provide for those who may be vulnerable to food poverty due to poor health.

Certain stakeholders discussed how the perceived prohibitive price of 'cooking from scratch', as well as lack of education regarding budgeting and cooking methods can increase susceptibility to food poverty. Food prices can be considered a structural contributor, and lack of cooking and budgeting skills can be considered an individual contributor, and perhaps also a structural contributor if linked to inadequate education in schools. These barriers have also been discussed in the literature as potentially preventing those on low incomes from making healthy food choices and as potential contributors to food poverty (Gaines *et al.*, 2014; Butcher *et al.*, 2019). However, a Canadian study with a large sample (n=16, 496) found that adults experiencing food poverty did not differ significantly from others with regards to their cooking skills (Huisken *et al.*, 2017).

Regarding household demographics, although gender by itself was not considered by stakeholders to be a predictor of food poverty, some stakeholders suggested certain mediating characteristics alongside gender which may increase vulnerability. Single mother households were suggested to be more susceptible; a household type which has been found in the literature to be more likely to be food insecure (Nord, 2009; Martin and Lippert, 2012). Further regarding gender, a second group, older men who had recently been bereaved, was considered particularly at risk. This group was identified by a stakeholder participant who worked in the community, and associated this assumption with the rationale that traditional gender roles may mean that older men may not have the same shopping, budgeting and food preparation skills and knowledge as women, therefore once bereaved they may be more likely to be food insecure. Butcher *et al* (2019) similarly discussed gender roles of women shopping for and preparing food in the home and how men living alone may be more at risk.

Regarding age, similarly to the literature, stakeholder views varied as to whether those who were retired would be more or less likely to be food insecure, i.e. whether their fixed income in the form of a pension, as well as likely reduced costs e.g. having mortgage paid off, was protective against food poverty, or whether pension income was insufficient (Vilar-Compte *et al.*, 2017; Leroux *et al.*, 2018).

Certain stakeholders discussed how the expense of childcare can be a significant outlay in household budgets which can increase vulnerability to food poverty. One suggested that pre-school childcare should be paid for by the government, the same way as schools are funded. ‘Universal childcare’ has also been suggested in the literature for implementation in the UK generally (Ben-Galim, 2011) and in NI specifically (McQuaid *et al.*, 2013), due to its potential

usefulness for both single and married parents, in allowing them to work without the burden of childcare costs.

Some stakeholders who worked in the community discussed how, in certain households, money can be prioritised for addictions such as alcohol as funding the addiction is viewed as a necessary expense. Those who are addicted to drugs or alcohol may have a reduced appetite (Jennings and Furey, 2006) and therefore perhaps will not have the same desire or requirement for food others in the household may have. This individualistic/behavioural contributor was also discussed by stakeholders in Butcher *et al's* (2019) study.

Certain stakeholders discussed social inequality as a primary contributor to food poverty. This aligns with structural and political theories. Theorists have attributed poverty to societal inequality (Nolan and Marx, 2009; Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015), suggesting that poverty occurs as a result of unequal income distribution (Lang and Lingnau, 2015).

Looking towards the future, uncertainty regarding the impending exit of the UK from the EU ('Brexit') and potential increases in food prices were discussed by stakeholders as structural / political impactors which could potentially increase vulnerability to food poverty, and reduce the ability of those on low incomes to purchase healthy foods. The potential of food price increases related to Brexit has also been considered in the literature (Lang *et al.*, 2017; Seferedi *et al.*, 2019). Increasing prices of commodities such as food could be particularly problematic for the most vulnerable consumers in further constraining their access to sufficient, appropriate food.

Findings regarding the predictors of household food insecurity are relevant because they evidence the contributors to (food) poverty including mental health, welfare reform and the working poor – all of which are likely to increase with the dual burden of Covid-19 and the end of the implementation period for the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In these uncertain economic times, it is possible that the Government will be open to reviewing and putting in place policies to protect the most vulnerable – certainly, in NI an anti-poverty strategy is under development currently. Cognisance of extant and emerging causalities of food poverty will inform anti-poverty policies generally in those developed countries where food insecurity prevails. Empirical evidence of the factors impacting on food insecurity in the UK specifically is important context as politicians seek to agree agri-food trade deals for and with the UK with the potential to impact on food affordability for the population into the future.

Limitations

The presence of an interviewer and others during roundtables may introduce potential for social desirability bias, the theory of which dictates that stakeholders may not be entirely truthful about their opinion if they feel it is not shared by the group or interviewer (Grimm, 2010; Jann *et al.*, 2019). Further, as those sampled had an interest in, or experience in the field of food poverty, their viewpoints regarding contributors to food poverty may be biased to dominantly consider the contributors to food poverty from one particular theoretical viewpoint informed by their experience.

Conclusions

Due to the complex nature of poverty it is acknowledged that no one theory is sufficient in explaining poverty by itself (Davis and Sanchez-Martinez, 2015), however, the theories

presented at the beginning of this paper attempt to explain how individual factors and broader structural factors can contribute towards incidence of this phenomenon. This research considered the theoretical perspectives of individual (behavioural), structural and political factors contributing towards food poverty. Both macro-level economic and individual level contributors (*household demographics, poor health, addiction, access, food knowledge and cooking skills, social support, change in circumstances, lack of savings/debt*) and micro-level economic contributors (*income and the changing nature of work, cost of living, food prices, systematic issues, government, problems with the welfare system, societal inequality, changing society*) were identified by stakeholders. The majority of contributors identified during interviews and roundtables could be classified as structural, followed by behavioural/individual contributors. Political contributors were least often cited, although some prominent causes discussed (welfare and societal inequality) align with the political theory perspective regarding the contributors to food poverty. Certain contributors such as unemployment and education could be regarded as either behavioural/individual or structural, as individuals may choose not to pursue education or employment, or alternatively for structural reasons may have reduced access to education or employment. Generally however stakeholders tended to blame structural contributors rather than individual. Although there were suggestions of practical actions at the individual level that should be addressed, such as education around food choice and nutrition, budgeting, and cooking skills, they generally felt that this was not an adequate response as the issue is deeper than at the individual level, and that in order to tackle the problem of food poverty and respond appropriately, it is therefore necessary to assert focus on the structural and political levels. Theoretically and conceptually considering and examining the contributors to food poverty can help inform appropriate solutions. Therefore, it is recommended that there is continued focus on identifying and addressing the causes of food poverty. Identifying causes of food poverty can aid policy solutions and development of interventions, which is of

particular relevance in the current uncertain economic times with concerns that Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic will result in financial recession, food price increases, and reductions in disposable income.

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